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A 3-YEAR PROGRAM, "MODERN SOCIETY--ITS VALUES AND ITS DEMANDS," WAS DEVISED TO MAKE USE OF THE VISUAL AND ORAL ABILITIES OF "RELUCTANT" SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS. SEVENTEEN MODERN NOVELS AND PLAYS IN CONJUNCTION WITH THEIR MOTION PICTURE ADAPTATIONS WERE STUDIED AND VIEWED. STUDENTS GRADED THE FILMS ON THE BASES OF CHARACTERIZATION, THEME, SOUND EFFECTS, DIRECTION, AND PHOTOGRAPHY, AND WERE REQUIRED TO DEFEND THEIR OPINIONS. CROSS-MEDIA LITERARY ANALYSIS WAS ENCOURAGED. THE MOST SUCCESSFUL MOVIE-BOOK UNITS ATTEMPTED WERE "DETECTIVE STORY," "A RAISIN IN THE SUN," AND "THE BRIDGES OF TOKO-RI," ALL OF WHICH TOUCHED ON CURRENT TEENAGE PROBLEMS. DURING THE COURSE OF THE PROGRAM, STUDENTS DEMONSTRATED REPEATEDLY THAT THEY WERE DEVELOPING GREATER PERCEPTION IN VIEWING FILMS. ALTHOUGH CROSS-MEDIA PROGRAMS REQUIRE LARGE BLOCKS OF TEACHER TIME, A SIZABLE BUDGET, AND INTERDEPARTMENTAL COOPERATION, THE APPROACH YIELDS MORE ENTHUSIASM AND A HIGHER QUALITY OF WORK FOR SLOW STUDENTS THAN HAS BEEN PREVIOUSLY EXPECTED. (THIS ARTICLE APPEARED IN "THE ENGLISH RECORD," VOL. 18 (DECEMBER 1967), 19-24.) (JB)

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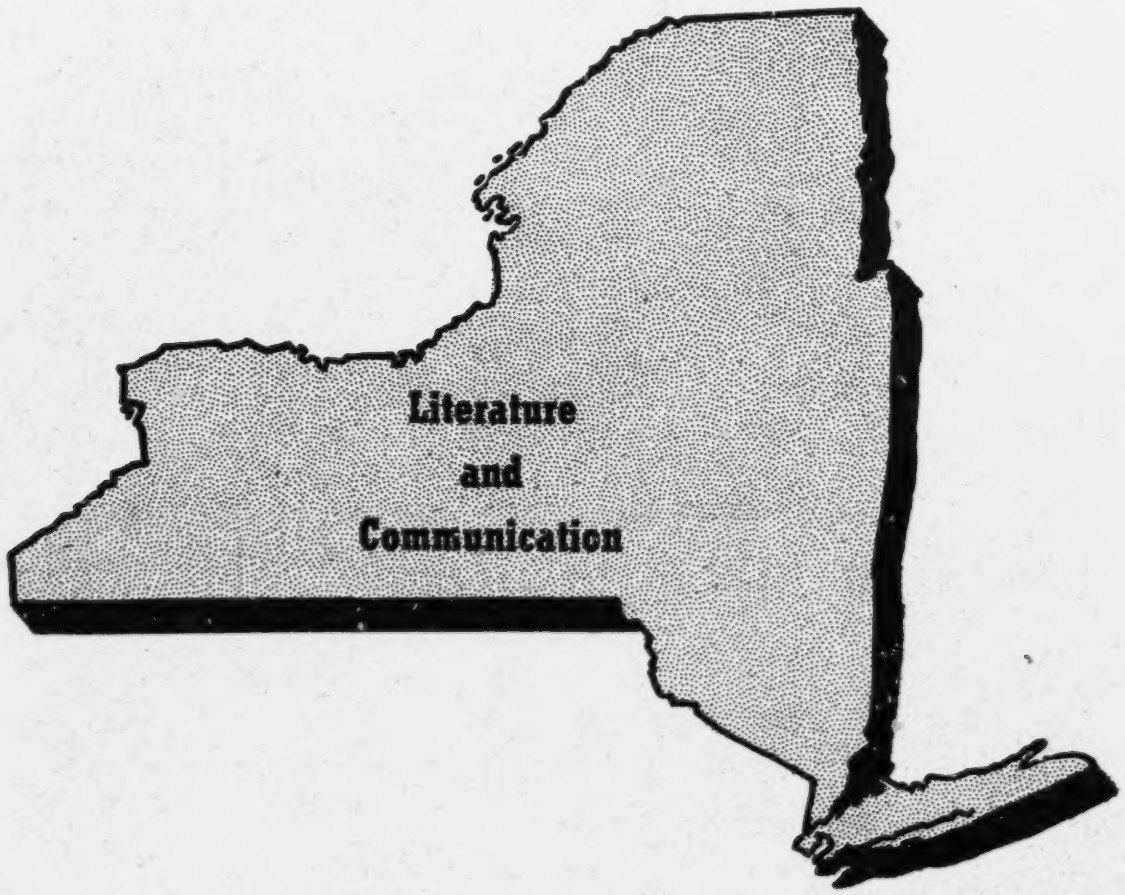

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THE USE OF MOTION PICTURES IN TEACHING SLOW LEARNERS

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The slow or reluctant student is considered by far too many teachers to be unteachable: he is poor in reading, spelling, grammar, writing, listening, and he often causes attendance, morale, and discipline problems. But I think that a chief reason for these difficulties is that the traditional English program is geared directly at his weaknesses and that he is merely reacting negatively to the negativism that pervades the average "slow" class.

In an attempt to stimulate interest in the more traditional, and for them more difficult, areas of English teaching, I decided three years ago to devise a course of study at Vernon-Verona-Sherrill Central School that made far greater use of what I had observed to be the students' strengths in visual and oral abilities.

My method was simple: since the "D" track at V.V.S. was practically oriented—as it is in most schools—the working title for the course of study—"Modern Society: Its Values and Its Demands"—came easily. I then selected seventeen popular modern works that were inexpensively available and that had been made into full-length Hollywood movies, and I arranged them according to a developmental sequence:

10th—*The Alphabet Murders*
The Call of the Wild
The Diary of Anne Frank
The Yearling

11th—*The Teahouse of the August Moon*
The Bridges At Toko-Ri
Arsenic and Old Lace

11th—*Champion*
Detective Story
A Raisin in the Sun

12th—*Stalag 17*
Shane
Bell, Book and Candle
A Night to Remember
The Maltese Falcon
All the Way Home
Seven Days In May

The four movies were purely supplementary in the tenth grade. In the eleventh grade the beginning of cross-media analysis started with the study of six films; the seven films in the twelfth grade became the basis for a course almost completely devoted to mass-media appreciation.

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But before beginning a specific discussion of some of these movie-book units, I think it might be wise to discuss briefly my approach to the literature in the course: I made use of what are the standard techniques for teaching slow learners: first, I threw out the *Adventures in Modern Literature* anthology that was the backbone of the old course because I had learned from experience that slow learners especially liked paperbacks for their ease in handling and, more importantly, for the fact that they did not carry the "dumb kid" stigma of the familiar anthology. But not only did they look just like the books the "smart kids" carried, they also offered more flexibility. Second, I tried to allow as much class time as possible for the reading of the books. This took three forms: 1) a class reading day while I held individual writing conferences; 2) the oral reading by the class of most of the plays; and 3) the re-reading of substantial portions of the work by the teacher to keep discussions from becoming too nebulous. Third, for each of the works studied I wrote a detailed study guide. Actually, these amounted to little more than the questions already incorporated in my lesson plan, but I felt that prior warning of what to look for would allow for greater class response and thus keep the slow thinkers from feeling uneasy when a question was thrown at them. Not every one paid attention to them, but the opportunity was there, and even if they did not use them, they appreciated the fact that they could if they desired.

My approach in writing the guides and in leading the class discussions that stemmed from them was always student-centered. Certainly, I included obvious questions on writing techniques, but for the most part I avoided the teaching of literature as literature and used the problem approach: "What would you do if you were in ————'s position?" "What do you think of ————'s decision, actions, character, etc.?" "How do you feel about ————?" At all times, I was attempting to elicit opinions, reactions, and ideas, rather than only facts. Never did I make ultimatums. The students soon recognized that I always took the role of the devil's advocate, forcing each student to know what he really thought and to defend it, rather than imposing my values upon him. I feel strongly that the purpose of a teacher is to help the student know himself, to establish his own values, and I have found that the best way to do this is to let the student do most of the talking.

Thus with the movies, too, I considered my role to be that of referee. I structured their reactions as little as possible to avoid doing to films what teachers had already done to literature for these students. A little vocabulary had to be introduced in the

junior year, of course, but I saw little reason to go beyond the most elementary terms, such as "cut," "fade," and "parallel editing." More important, I thought, was the quotation from Elizabeth Bowen's article "Why I Go to the Cinema":

> I go to the cinema for any number of different reasons—these I ought to sort out and range in order of their importance. At random here are a few of them: I go to be distracted (or 'taken out of myself'); I go when I don't want to think; I go when I do want to think and need stimulus; I go to see pretty people; I go when I want to see life ginned up, charged with unlikely energy; I go to laugh; I go to be harrowed; I go when a day has been such a mess of detail that I am glad to see even the most arbitrary, the most preposterous, pattern emerge; I go because I like bright light, abrupt shadow, speed; I go to see America, France, Russia; I go because I like wisecracks and slick behavior; I go because the screen is an oblong opening into the world of fantasy for me; I go because I like story, with its suspense; I go because I like sitting in a packed crowd in the dark, among hundreds riveted on the same thing; I go to have my most general feelings played on.[1]

The interesting discussion that followed elicited, among other things, that the students go to the movies for similar reasons, for escape, for enjoyment, or for enrichment. Next, I attempted to put the film in historical and sociological perspective by reading the most interesting passages from "Changing Trends in the American Film" in Arthur Knight's fine book *The Liveliest Art.* After discussing it they began to realize there was more to the film than its plot. To help them see this more clearly I asked them to vote on a TV show the class could watch and discuss the next day. In the past, they have chosen "A Man Called Shenandoah," "Run For Your Life," and "I Spy," using the following guide questions:

1) Can the program be divided or *organized* into acts and scenes? Do the commercials fit into the program? In other words, does the program seem to be written so the commercials will be watched? Explain.
2) What did you think of the program's camera work or *presentation?* Is it run-of-the-mill, or has it been filmed with originality, using effective camera angles, special effects, or cuts? Cite specific examples to support your position.
3) Does the program's *subject matter* appeal to the mass audience? Why or why not?

And to stimulate discussion beyond the "I liked it!" "I didn't like it!" level for the first few movies, I dittoed a list of film elements that could be rated A through F: Theme, Plot; Characterization; Direction; Photography; Sound and Musical effects.

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[1] Charles Davy ed., **Footnotes to the Film** (New York: Oxford University Press, 1937), p. 205.

Never, however, did I overemphasize this fragmentation of a work of art. I thought of it simply as a means of helping students make value judgments: the grade for a particular phase of the film was merely a way to get at the reasons behind the evaluation.

Three of the most successful movie-book units were *The Bridges At Toko-Ri, Detective Story,* and *A Raisin in the Sun.* Throughout our discussion of the novel, *The Bridges At Toko-Ri,* we made parallels to the war in Viet Nam because Michener's point about "voluntary men" in Korea fighting because they had to—because that was the way life was—was brutally applicable to the present conflict. During the week and a half of reading and discussing this book, the movie was eagerly awaited by the students. They were not disappointed. Most assumed that drastic changes would be made in Michener's bitter book, but they were surprised. The movie held to the same basic viewpoint, that the people in the States remained apathetic about the war because they lived away from it, and the fighters in Korea act as they do because of their tradition and training and because of the necessity of the moment. They were shocked by the fact that Brubaker, the hero, was killed, dying inglorously in a muddy drainage ditch. In fact, for many students it was the first movie they had seen that ended so unhappily, and the debate on its merits came to a standstill, though the majority of the class liked it. This movie was also useful for the discussion of cinematic technique because director Mark Robson used every imaginable camera angle to emphasize the power of the war apparatus, and he constantly placed the camera in the action to involve the audience. The class was also impressed by his use of special effects in simulating battle scenes.

In the cross-media analysis they also made some observations which gave evidence that they were beginning to see how the values of the mass audience shape and control its entertainment. For example, they noticed that the pilot's psalm (a mock version of the twenty-third) was omitted and that the bar girl was not nude. Furthermore, they observed that the key public bath scene was filmed very discreetly with convenient barriers and very young Japanese daughters. In the final segment of the story, the innocent Korean family gunned down accidentally by screaming jets was omitted as was the Admiral's final statement that there were never enough "voluntary" men. Many of the students were annoyed by these omissions; they felt that the American public should be mature enough to accept the truth even when it was not pretty.

These same students made the grim drama, *Detective Story,* one of the major successes of the junior course. This story of a

man unable to forgive, to bend, to yield, gripped them. Perhaps because at least three senior girls drop out because of pregnancy each year, the central conflict was even closer to their experience. The day we discussed this issue was the highlight of the year for me. Most of the girls and some of the boys were for forgiving Mary because she had been young and had thought she was in love and certainly had led an exemplary life since meeting and marrying Jim McLeod. The remainder of the boys were adamant: she was wrong, she knew it, and she should have told Jim about her past. No matter how hard the majority tried to convince those boys, they held their ground, and I think it is safe to say that the rest of the class, especially the girls, learned more that day than they had all year.

The movie was equally successful. Just before viewing I told them to watch for the techniques William Wyler used to keep the movie from becoming another filmed play. They handled the subject beautifully. Most noticed that the whole precinct house was used instead of just one room, and all noticed that the director had taken several key scenes right out of the station completely. With a few pointed questions they also recalled that Wyler seldom showed the whole room at once; he focused action on various parts of the room to give the impression of space. The class was especially pleased with the realism achieved with the sweat-stained shirts, the one-finger typists, and the almost total absence of music. Everyone felt that the acting was as good as that in any of the films seen.

The cross-media analysis again confirmed the conclusions they had been drawing all along. The language was cleaned up a bit, and Mary's transgression was watered down somewhat, for in the movie she went with Tami seven months instead of four—and her child was still-born instead of aborted. Furthermore, the ending was lightened a bit, for though McLeod died, the final shot of the film was that of young Arthur and Susan running out of the station to start a new life.

A Raisin in the Sun was a favorite and, except for a few diehards, very well accepted. The majority of the students could identify with the central conflict, a family falling apart, without missing it as just another sermon on racial equality. They saw that Negroes are first and foremost humans and that most are no more interested in crusades than anyone else.

The movie was extremely well done, which was gratifying, for a large number in the class had begun automatically to assume that the movie would be poorer than the original. All felt, however, the movie was an improvement: first, because Mama's motivation for giving Walter the $6,000 was much clearer when the action took place in a bar where she could see what had hap-

pened to her son, and her reasons were also made clearer by the supplementary conversation in this scene about why she had decided to come North when she was young; and second, because Asagayi's abstract, intellectual discussion on his willingness to give his all for his country was replaced by an important theme of the movie: it is wrong when dreams depend upon a dead man.

The students' filmic sense also continued to sharpen. We had decided before seeing the movie that the director's main problems would be cramped quarters and a script dominated by words, but all felt that Daniel Petrie combatted them successfully. Everyone recognized the effectiveness of his "prowling" camera that shot from everywhere but the ceiling, and because we discussed it when we read the play, they saw the symbolic significance of Mama's plant. But I was more pleased with some of the other discoveries. Three students noticed the effective use of transitions—dropped paper to dropped ironing, dark close-up of Walter to a spinning record, and the dark bedroom to the sunlit cab. And one boy even recognized that in not having the camera always on the characters, the director was able to create an interesting effect—as when Ruth faints, or when Walter stands and then pulls Bobo up to him.

What, one might ask, are the drawbacks of a cross-media program? First, it is an expensive way to teach English, as the three-year program I have just outlined cost $500 in rental fees and, because it is a continuous expense, a school board could decide to cancel it at any time. Second, it means constantly working according to a rigid time schedule—a schedule so tight that a subway strike in New York City or a snow day in Central New York can make a movie impossible to get in time for a showing. Offering a course of this kind can be frustrating because it requires team effort with the Business Office, the Film Libraries, and the Audio-Visual Department. The third drawback is that it takes a tremendous amount of teacher time to employ this method. Available movies are constantly changing, and each change means more research and another lesson plan. Likewise, television is a very difficult medium with which to work. Each program is just for one day; next year the series may no longer exist, and even if it does, it may be a different episode. Paperbacks also present problems because, except for classics, most go out of print after a few years, especially when the movie was the real source of popularity in the first place.

Notwithstanding the work involved and the ensuing complications and frustrations, I shall continue with the program, since this approach yields more enthusiasm and interest and a higher quality of work than I have ever been able to expect from so-called "slow" students.

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